

Prelude to conspiracy

THE UFO CONTROVERSY IN AMERICA. By David Michael Jacobs. Indiana University Press; \$12.50.

Reviewed by James D. White

In 1947 a fairly typical American saw something very untypical in the Pacific Northwest. He talked about it, and the ensuing argument over his experience left a split in the American public mind from which it still hasn't recovered. When Kenneth Arnold, a businessman-pilot from Boise, Idaho, encountered a dozen or so shining, disc-like objects flying in wobbly formation along the Cascade range, it was by no means the first sighting of "flying saucers" or Unidentified Flying Objects (UFO's), but it was the first to gain nationwide news coverage of such sustained dimension and duration.

Other sightings followed and were reported. The nation squared off into two camps: those who believed Arnold had seen something new and different, those who believed he hadn't. Perhaps a more fundamental cleavage developed between those who considered it important to find out what the UFO's were, and those who really didn't want to see the subject dealt with at all. Between these two camps were those who tried to remain openminded but who didn't want to get involved. They ended up, inevitably, helping the holdouts for the status quo.

After more than a quarter of a century of this deadlock, a trained historian has tackled the task of trying to make some kind of objective sense out of it. Among scores of books on UFO's, this is the first to be published by an academic press. Dr. Jacobs has drawn on previously restricted Air Force records, on personal interviews and private correspondence among many principals in the dispute, and on the enormous volume of more readily available material to cover this tangled field. He found it all but virgin as far as objective study is concerned.

Dr. Jacobs holds a doctorate in American history

from the University of Wisconsin and teaches at Temple University; with the duty of the historian to consider all sides of a question, he escorts anyone interested through the jungle growth of passion, prejudice, ignorance, fakery and lies that have muddled the UFO picture and choked the path toward what yet might be humankind's most illuminating experience — that of discovering we are not alone.

His general thesis is that common sense was shouted down early in the dispute and only recently has shown signs of regaining its voice. At first, when significant numbers of people began seeing strange things in the sky in 1947, there was a sensible unanimity both among believers and non-believers: whatever it was that people were seeing or thought they were seeing, no one, certainly, knew what it was. At this point, Jacobs contends, the question should have been simply whether what they saw was truly anomalous — genuinely new, different and not explainable by accepted scientific standards.

Instead, the argument mired down in specific areas, in quarrels over whether the strange phenomena were illusions, delusions, extraterrestrial in origin or human-made, and whether the Air Force was hiding something. These were important questions, Jacobs holds, but not the first needing an answer. The central question should have been whether the real or fancied phenomena were different enough to be worth looking into seriously with the investigatory tools and techniques available to the inhabitants of this planet. This issue never has been decisively and objectively confronted, he finds, and only now is such study becoming a matter of widespread scientific interest.

Necessarily, Dr. Jacobs' fully indexed and footnoted work is limited in scope to what the title suggests — the course of the argument over UFO's in America. If, thus limited, he has had to gloss over the considerable empirical evidence that UFO's have been around since recorded memory began, and if he necessarily has skipped over extensive sightings and investigations throughout the rest of the world which have influenced the American controversy, he at least



has gone back to the 1890's to begin his account with the wave of "airship" sightings in the United States at that time. In this, all-but-forgotten episode he finds, fully in operation, the same patterns of ridicule and

other excesses which later converged to dominate the UFO controversy that mushroomed after the 1947 sightings. Step by embarrassing step, he takes us from 1947 through 1974 — 27 years of very tangled events — and traces the evolution of the arguments over them. In systematizing this massive muddle, not the least of Dr. Jacobs' accomplishments is to leave the scholarly and scientific community with considerably less excuse to go on avoiding it.

He puts under rigorous scrutiny the near-hysterical reactions generated since 1947 and analyzes the role of each element: the alarm of officialdom, especially the military, over the possible threat to national security; the skepticism and timidity of the scientific community; the gullibility and irresponsibility of the information media; the outrage of those who experienced UFO's and soon found themselves, not just not believed, but often cruelly ridiculed; the inevitable exploiters, the fakers and phonies who invaded the field; the deluded visionaries who gravitated to this exotic new scene and complicated everything — all these factors went into a mix of irrationality that was anything but supportive of serious investigation.

By 1953, the situation was thoroughly if not hopelessly confused. At this point, Jacobs says — without dealing with the possibility that the Central Intelligence Agency had been active all along — the CIA got into the picture to help the Air Force straighten it out. With CIA help, the solution reached that year was the secret Robertson panel, a group of scientists whose existence and function did not become known publicly until years later. One of the Robertson Panel's members was so unfamiliar with the whole UFO phenomenon that he expressed surprise when told they were being seen outside the United States. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the Robertson group did nothing to rock the boat. It did conclude that UFO's apparently were not hostile and therefore not in themselves a threat to national security. But with characteristic Cold War logic it also concluded that the reports about UFO's were dangerous because if not controlled, they could

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Another member: Dr. Luis Alvarez

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generate panic and possibly jam communications during a real national emergency.

The upshot was that from 1953 on, until the famous Condon Report of late 1968, the Air Force treated the UFO problem as one primarily of public relations. The thrust of the PR treatment was to keep UFO news coverage at a minimum, both in volume and impact, and to ward off at all costs any threat of serious Congressional investigation. In these objectives the Air Force had the willing cooperation of most of the information media, and of all but a handful of scientists. Ridicule and authoritative denial were powerful weapons against those who failed to conform. The media showed little stomach for challenging this situation, and the scientist who strayed openly from the accepted norm risked professional ruin.

In 1968 the Air Force spent some \$500,000 of the taxpayers' money for the Condon Committee Report. This was purported to be a scientific study to settle the UFO question once and for all. (A year later, the Air Force publicly washed its hands of the whole painful UFO business.) The Condon group concluded mainly that the UFO phenomenon was not worth further scientific investigation, but the inadequacy of its methods in reaching this nice answer was so apparent that it may have done more than any previous factor to interest serious scientists in the subject it sought to dispose of.

In the meantime, year after year, the UFO's kept coming. By the time of the massive wave of sightings in 1973, the climate had changed. Human beings themselves had achieved modest space flight and had reached the moon. A Gallup Poll taken after the 1973 wave showed that 51 per cent of adult Americans believed UFO's were real, and that 11 percent—or a projected 15 million—were willing to tell interviewers they had seen one.

This 11 per cent figure was more than double the 5 per cent the same poll had found in 1966. More and more scientists were becoming interested enough to brave the still-present risk of ridicule and professional suicide. Some quietly joined existing investigative organizations; others formed their own study groups

and quickly discovered what the private investigators had been saying all along: that the UFO problem, in all its apparent implications, is interdisciplinary, demanding the special insights of many different fields of learning. Most of the physical sciences are involved, from pure physics through metallurgy and fluid mechanics and astronomy to exobiology. So also are the social sciences, from history, religion and anthropology through and beyond psychology into the new fields exploring the paranormal.

With more scientists speaking up on the UFO question, the information media were encouraged to respond to the 1973 wave of sightings with a level of coverage marked by more objectivity and less tongue-in-cheek sarcasm and sly newsroom humor. While still properly cautious about UFO's, the media now also were cautious about automatically treating a sighting report as the product of a fool or a charlatan.

In detailing and documenting this often shabby story of how the UFO question was handled from 1947 through 1974, Dr. Jacobs presents—whether he intended to or not—a dissected case history of how the PR tail can wind up wagging the policy dog among American officialdom, and how it succeeds.

If the treatment the UFO's got did not set actual precedents for subsequent coverups and attempted coverups, it at least helped create the climate for such official capers as the Gulf of Tonkin incident, Watergate, and the consequences of both. *The UFO Controversy in America*, therefore, sharpens all over again a fundamental question: how far can a democracy, which cannot function without an informed public, leave its policy decisions to elements whose respect for the truth can be subordinated to their concern over whether it's going to play in Peoria?

James D. White is a former news agency correspondent (AP), who has followed the UFO controversy since the foo-fighters appeared during World War II.